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FM AMEMBASSY NIAMEY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5195
INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 1626
RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEHLMC/MCC WASHDC

UNCLAS NIAMEY 000522

DEPT FOR AF/W, AF/RSA, DRL/AE, AND AF/PDPA LISENBY
DEPT PLS PASS TO USAID FOR AFR/W
ADDIS ABABA FOR USAU - J MAYBURY
ACCRA FOR USAID/WA
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SUBJECT: Independent Media to Strike July 20-26

Ref: a) Niamey 00515, b) Niamey 00521, c) Niamey 00520, d) Niamey 00504

11. Summary: Independent media organizations will go silent on July 20 - 26 in protest of President Tandja's decision to restrict press freedoms by strengthening the hand of the president of the media regulatory body, the High Council for Communication (CSD), part of a trend of public outcry over President Tandja's efforts to remain in power. In addition to granting the CSC President expanded media control authorities, the Government of Niger (GON) cast another cold shadow over the media by briefly detaining a leading opposition leader following his comments on a private radio station. End summary.

INDEPENDENT MEDIA TO GO SILENT IN PROTEST

12. Independent media organizations will strike from July 20 - 26 to protest President Tandja's unilateral decision to rein them in by expanding the authority of the CSC President (ref A). In a meeting on July 13, the private print media decided not to publish from July 20 - 26, and independent radio and TV will observe a news blackout on July 21. A statement released after the meeting decried the new powers of the CSC President to close independent media operators down without due process - either requiring him to confer with others of the 11-member body or to achieve either a consensus or majority view as in the past - which they claimed undermines democracy and the rule of law during a critical period of national political debate. The statement also demanded an immediate repeal of this decision.

PART OF A FABRIC OF PROTESTS

13. This strike would be the latest in a series of wide-ranging expressions of public discontent with President Tandja's scheme to remain in power through a constitutional referendum to extend his mandate. Recent events include a July 15 sit-in of dozens of women of the Front for the Defense of Democracy (FDD) in support of the recently dismissed Constitutional Court, which the Niger Intervention and Security Forces (FNIS) dispersed forcibly with tear gas and batons (ref B); a national Bar Association strike on July 13 (ref C); and a rally of several thousand protesters in downtown Niamey on July 5 (ref D).

OPPOSITION LEADER DETAINED FOR INFLAMMATORY REMARKS

14. Police briefly detained leading opposition leader Bazoum Mohammed, deputy president of the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS), for questioning on July 14 after he called for a boycott of President Tandja's August 4 referendum during an interview on a local independent radio station the day before.

Police released him after two hours without filing charges. He told the Voice of America (VOA) after his release that the government had accused him of encouraging the public to engage in illegal actions.

ALLEN